



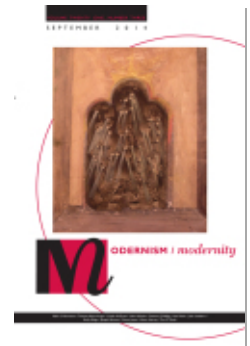
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George Egerton's Translocational Subjects

Tina O'Toole

The name of George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright) (1859–1945) became practically synonymous with decadence when Elkin Mathews and John Lane's partnership, the Bodley Head, published her sexually bold first collection of short stories, *Keynotes* (1893). Yet this Irish writer, whose work reflects her life on three different continents, is not usually credited with making innovations in migrant fiction. Instead, critics tend to align her oeuvre not only with controversies surrounding decadence (such as the inclusion of her short story "A Lost Masterpiece" in the scandalous first issue of the *Yellow Book*) but also with the polemic about New Woman writing during the fin de siècle.¹ Graced with one of Aubrey Beardsley's earliest illustrations on the title page, *Keynotes*—which draws on English, Irish, and Norwegian settings—features a decidedly Scandinavian modernist style (one influenced by Knut Hamsun and Ola Hansson) and erotically assertive women protagonists. Yet, as I explain here, Egerton's distinctive vision of new translocational Irish subjectivities in the critically neglected short story "The Chessboard of Guendolen" (1905) helps to bring her oeuvre into dialogue with recent scholarship in the related fields of migration and diaspora studies. In this remarkable narrative, three migrants—a male aesthete, a New Woman, and an imperial war correspondent—encounter one another in London. As the story unfolds, it reminds us of how frequently Egerton drew on her firsthand experiences of the disruption between home and her adopted country.² Egerton's migrations (which took her from Australia to Ireland, Germany, England, and Norway as well as the United States) enabled her to develop highly unusual types of subjectivity in fiction, ones that departed from normative nineteenth-century codes that

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828 sought to regulate the proper place of men and women in relation to class, gender, and nation.³ Nowhere is this clearer than in “The Chessboard of Guendolen,” which amplifies key elements of her migrant novel, *The Wheel of God* (1898), in which her Irish protagonist Mary Desmond contends with the unnerving mechanized modernity of New York City.

While several scholars of Egerton’s work have paid attention to *The Wheel of God*, they have largely overlooked “The Chessboard of Guendolen,” a story whose title refers to a Welsh legend about the unpredictability of fate.⁴ This is in part because of the story’s comparatively late publication date in 1905, by which time interest in Egerton’s writing had seriously waned. She had completed the narrative in 1901, intending it to be a part of the collection *Flies in Amber*, but she found it almost impossible to find a publisher for the volume; although he had vigorously supported her early career, Lane—who weathered a storm of hostility with the *Yellow Book*—was no longer willing to take the risks that her fiction posed. Eventually, Hutchinson issued the collection but, since it received few notices and modest sales, it quickly disappeared from view. *Flies in Amber* has remained out of print ever since. “The Chessboard of Guendolen” enables us to see the extension of her aesthetic experiments into the late 1890s and, more to the point, to appreciate the degree to which migration is a driving force throughout her oeuvre.

Certainly, critics have attended to the Scandinavian cultural and literary background that informs several of Egerton’s best-known short fictions, such as “The Spell of the White Elf” (1893). Yet scholars have only recently focused on Egerton as an expressly Irish writer, a perspective that has assisted greatly in revealing her sustained interest in migration.⁵ One of the reasons why it has proved hard for researchers to grasp this crucial element in her fiction relates to the dominant accounts of Irish emigration in the literature of the period. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Egerton does not create a diasporic space that binds the emigrant within an Irish expatriate community—a space fixed by ties of culture, class, religion, and a predefined relationship to the homeland. Rather, she tends to shape her Irish characters, both women and men, as rootless nomads whose identities are forged in a range of contact zones across the colonial world. Her fictions therefore unsettle established beliefs about Irish emigration, such as the idea that Irish people during the post-Famine period only migrated to specific urban areas of the United States, where they created satellite communities bounded by a common Irish identity. We might say, then, that Egerton’s later writings “transnationalize” Irishness by attending to the connections and potential incompatibilities between received forms of national identity within Ireland and different ideas about national identity throughout the diaspora.⁶ In what follows, I trace in Egerton’s fiction the emergence of her translocational subjects within a complex nexus of Irish, European, and global locations, all of which reach beyond the territories familiar to much decadent and New Woman literature.

Egerton, Ireland, and Migrancy

In the 1890s, readers, publishers, and critics made few distinctions between aesthetic and New Woman literary experiments; the two were identified as decadent.⁷ Margaret D. Stetz suggests that following the dissolution of his business partnership with Mathews in 1894, Lane “turned the firm into a haven for ‘New Woman’ fiction, naturalistic short stories, and ‘decadent’ poetry.”⁸ Egerton’s work and her reputation were a significant means through which Lane achieved this end. The title of her best-selling collection lent its name to the Bodley Head’s “Keynotes Series,” which included radical works by a range of authors, including Ella D’Arcy, Gertrude Dix, Grant Allen, E. Nesbit, and Mabel E. Wotton.⁹ Her shaping of what Ann L. Ardis refers to as “truth-claims” about sexuality gave Egerton’s material the erotic charge associated with aestheticism, making it in turn highly marketable: “It was almost as if the most notorious passage in *Keynotes*, Egerton’s revelation of female nature, served as advertising copy for the whole series.”¹⁰ Furthermore, her adoption of Scandinavian models, Nietzschean philosophy, and avant-garde formal experimentation meant that *Keynotes* was clearly identified as a decadent work. Egerton also helped to shape the literary output of the Bodley Head in practical ways. Her letters to John Lane in the mid-1890s underline his reliance on her literary judgment, and her multilingual skills and grasp of a wide range of emerging intellectual discourses proved very useful to him.¹¹ Egerton’s innovative writings are extraordinary for their time because they deploy at once elements of aestheticism, symbolism, naturalism, and New Woman discourses, as well as mediate her exceptional knowledge of English, Irish, American, and Scandinavian society.

In her works of fiction, Egerton frequently removes a central protagonist from an urban to a rural environment or from one country to another and thereby establishes transcultural connections between Ireland and northern Europe or between London and its rural hinterland. Iain Chambers’s specific use of the term “migrancy” to refer to “a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain” helps to describe the careers of Egerton’s characters, since it stresses fluidity rather than fixity.¹² This is particularly the case with O’Brien in “The Chessboard of Guendolen.” He belongs to an emergent Irish migrant cadre whose members occupied a double position as both subjects of what was known as the “first colony” and as middle managers of the rest of the British Empire. This group of Irishmen were simultaneously imperial subjects and the empire’s agents during the *fin de siècle*. As Gerardine Meaney observes, “Colonized or ethnically distinct whites such as the Irish and Scottish provided the British Empire with a highly expendable soldiery and an army of civil servants to deploy around the empire in the nineteenth century.”¹³ These individuals broke with fixed ideas about previous generations of Irish emigrants, such as those that fulfilled the well-known narrative of the poor and dispossessed Irish Catholic migrant who made good in the country of adoption.

“The Chessboard of Guendolen” is one of the rare stories in Egerton’s oeuvre set in London, and it is squarely located in the mid- to late 1890s, as conversations about the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902)—the “pending row in South Africa”—make

830 plain.¹⁴ O'Brien, a journalist who follows this military conflict, is the first character we meet, and he gives voice to the jingoism prevalent in London at that time. As he offers a military solution to fin-de-siècle emasculation, O'Brien bluntly rejects the soul-searching of his aesthetic friend Earle: "Rot! You want a war—that's what fellows of your kidney want; and you'll get it soon, or I'm a Dutchman. It won't be the first time Tommy's had to cook his rations on an African ant-heap" (155). O'Brien's Irishness presents no difficulty in his choosing sides in the war; his sense of identification with "Tommy," the nickname of that quintessentially working-class British soldier, is plain.¹⁵ Yet, despite the machismo in his evocation of "Tommy," this war correspondent's ideological position is not altogether as clear-cut as this exchange might suggest. Rather, O'Brien's unconventional relationship with the New Woman protagonist, who earns an independent living as an author, suggests an enlightened attitude: "They were friends of long standing" (146). O'Brien's first description of this woman friend is as a fellow writer, one "fighting her way right pluckily" in the world (146). An admirer of the New Woman's autonomy, O'Brien himself is highly self-reliant; he, like her, remains unattached. He is a mediating figure here, one that the narrator describes as "the gambit": the (unwilling) agent who initiates the plot by bringing the other two actors together (145). He functions as a go-between on a range of levels, not just in his capacity as a journalist who conveys news of military strife in one part of the global empire to the metropolitan center. We learn that O'Brien is a walking "glossary of out-of-the-way tongues" and that his defining characteristic is migrancy; we are told that he was "known in every capital of Europe" as well as in "every out-of-the-way corner of the globe where Europeans foregather to exploit the native or their own commerce" (144). Gerd Bjørhovde points up the transient restlessness of many of Egerton's protagonists and suggests that their subjectivities reveal "a loss of stability," since for them nothing is "permanent any more—neither values nor feelings, perhaps not even personality."¹⁶ The ease with which O'Brien moves through the social world suggests just such a rootlessness, a rootlessness that is characteristic of modernism (Joseph Conrad's contemporaneous *Nostromo* [1904] presents a very well-known example).

Partly based on her second husband, Egerton Clairmonte, O'Brien—"a long-backed, loose-limbed, big Irishman, in light homespun clothes and a wide-brimmed hat"—bears a strong resemblance to Roger Casement, a well-known figure who was, at the time, British consul to the Congo (143). In what might count as an exact description of Casement's career, O'Brien leads a peripatetic existence between London and far-flung locations: "Whether one met him, treading warily through the quagmire of Legation Street on his way to the old Peking Club, or in the smoking-room of the palatial rendezvous facing the river at Shanghai, or in the card-room of the Rand Club, he was always welcomed as a 'whole white man'" (144–45). Despite the status and access to influential circles that O'Brien's position affords him, we learn that he is nonetheless a liminal character; he has no domestic establishment and no family to speak of but rather makes his home in a transient community of outsiders in the various colonial outposts he briefly visits. O'Brien's exchanges with his London friends are always carried out in transit as he dashes from one appointment to another or prepares to leave the

country on another mission; his final interview with the New Woman protagonist, for instance, takes place in a liminal zone, in the doorway of her rooms. This ambiguous position was familiar to Egerton.

While we have no access to O'Brien's inner life in this story, Egerton's Irish nomads usually experience profound alienation and dislocation. They experience the shock of urban existence and anomie on a number of levels; jolting spatial and temporal shifts recur in these fictions. In *The Wheel of God*, Egerton contrasts the torpid atmosphere of preindustrial Dublin with the modern mass society that Mary Desmond discovers in New York:

Life seemed less concrete, less inside the houses and warehouses; it was everywhere, pounding like a gigantic steam-hammer, full speed, in the air, in the streets—insistent, noisy, attention-compelling. Trains above one's head; one caught glimpses of domestic interiors, intimate bedroom scenes, as one whizzed past second stories in the early cars. . . . Mary [Desmond] felt that the clocks in America must surely give two ticks to the one of the sedate old timepieces at home.¹⁷

By highlighting the adverse effects of modernity, Egerton underlines the detrimental impact of this “monstrous international sifting sieve”: the loss of a private life and of intimate relations when domestic interiors and private lives are on display (68). The final line, which refers to temporal differences between the urban metropolis and the “sedate old” world of home, may be a general comment on the pace of life but it would also have reminded her (mostly English) readers of the time difference between London and Dublin.¹⁸ While the physical and emotional impact of modern living is palpable here, the urban sophisticates we encounter in “The Chessboard of Guendolen,” at least at first glance, have made their own accommodations in their careful negotiations of this alien metropolitan space.

The opening street scenes demonstrate the mental distance that these Irish migrants maintain from people they encounter: a characteristic often associated in this period with Charles Baudelaire's Parisian flâneur. Our first glimpse of the New Woman comes through the eyes of Earle and then O'Brien, and the narrative captures these two urban strollers' somewhat detached observational technique. Earle, an artist, constructs her exclusively as an aesthetic spectacle: “a little blue butterfly, airily astray in the town” (145). O'Brien, meanwhile, is initially complicit in keeping the vision airborne while confounding it somewhat: “a little blue butterfly of entirely modern culture, a little blue butterfly of some complexity”; it is only afterward that he humanizes the woman by describing her as an active cultural agent, referring to her as “the writer of *Emotions in Mosaic*, and a very good journalist into the bargain” (145). Earle, however, remains determined to objectify his creature aesthetically, dwelling on her physical appearance: “Her hair, her gown, which . . . had as much the ‘note’ of the day as one of Fournery's artistic fashion-plates.” He even makes mention of her use of powder and kohl—“a touch of the artificial enhanced her natural charm” (147). In many ways, Earle, who considers “a touch of the artificial” to be an improvement on imperfect nature, echoes Irish aesthete Oscar Wilde: “Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it,

832 and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment."¹⁹ Clearly, the New Woman's only resonance for Earle is as a motive for his own art; at this stage, she holds little other interest for him.

Earle, maintaining the flâneur's careful aesthetic distance from the woman, decides that her charm is a "modern" one: "It belonged to civilisation, to cities; it fitted in with electric light and late hours, was part of the picture" (147). His scheme is to separate her from the natural, to make her consistent with modernity, electric lighting, and industrial mechanisms such as fashion and hairstyling ("the newest way of doing the hair," he observes, "altered the tilt of the universal sailor hat" [147]). In this way, he can sustain the "impenetrable barrier" between his position as artist/spectator and hers as object of the gaze. This is a common attitude in texts connected with decadence written by men. As Charles Bernheimer points out in his reading of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*: "Once physical distance from woman's decadence has been achieved, then she can be appreciated as a welcome poetic effect in the distance. So removed is she then from her 'repulsive natural functions' that the philosopher can imagine taking them over for himself."²⁰ It is only after he has fixed the woman in place and rendered neutral her "natural functions" that Earle risks interacting with her.

There is no mistaking Earle's distanced flânerie, since O'Brien muses that "he was never quite sure of Earle, never sure what was ingrained or what was just veneer. The boy had got into a wrong set at the start, and stayed in it because it amused him" (154). Through his languid movement, Earle exhibits a "bored pose" and a "usually slow utterance" (154), yet there are hints that this belies his active inquisitiveness in the world around him: the bored expression and languid speech was paradoxically at variance with a briskness of step, that suggested a corresponding alertness of mind and elasticity of temperament" (145). It seems, then, that Earle's unhurried posturing may be a self-defense mechanism; his motto—"the artist is best alone"—is perhaps his way of containing emotional challenges and the threat that mass society presents to his bodily integrity (159). In his studied lethargy and deliberate utterance, he ostensibly attempts to slow down the pace of modernity, at least insofar as it impacts on him. Earle maintains this type of aesthetic pose throughout the early scenes, referring to "a recent book of verse . . . which was lying on the couch" in terms of the "effect of *la tristesse contemporaine* on recent art" (155). The narrator details his curriculum vitae for anyone who might have missed his aesthetic credentials. Described at first as a "painter of some merit," he has exhibited and received critical attention from the discerning; simultaneously, we learn, he created "the cleverest poster of the year," an achievement that links his work with that of contemporary illustrators such as Charles Ricketts. His literary output might be attributed to Wilde, since he has "written a brilliant, but disagreeable book; given out a limited edition of *vers-de-société*, which contained a few little lyrics that came under the heading of poetry; and had made a hit with a curiously healthy fore-piece in one of the fashionable actor-manager play-houses" (152).²¹ Earle's performative ennui is coupled with a carefully shrouded work ethic, just like that of Wilde, whose industriousness often went unnoticed. Earle has

painstakingly covered his tracks in other ways, too. While his effete demeanor prompts associations with homosexuality, it conceals another sexual story. O'Brien is openly irritated by this aspect of Earle's character: "He felt some way convinced that the boy did not mean a word he said; he had caught him playing football once, and ever since had doubts of him" (155); the allegation that Earle has been participating in ritualistic masculine behavior in this manner is clearly meant to suggest that despite his aesthetic pretensions, he really belongs to a more virile (in other words, heterosexual) culture.

Ultimately, Earle accuses O'Brien of being "fatiguingly serious" (156), and Earle describes his philosophy thus: "The existence of the world, in my opinion, is only really justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, whether dithyrambic in the wake of Dionysius or spinning beautiful dreams in the wake of Apollo" (156). O'Brien immediately dismisses this statement as "second-hand Nietzsche" (157), and he complains that even should his predicted war come to pass, "the worst of it is, a war picks off the men and leaves all you half-men flourishing like chickweed" (156). This idea of morbid growth echoes later in the description of "a certain type of literary young man in London" as a "medlar": "never good as a fruit until he's rotten" (159–60). These references to degeneration, along with the description of Earle as a "half-man," lend weight to what Charles Bernstein might describe as the "diagnosis of decadence" (*Decadent Subjects*, 139). As such, the scene might be read as a straightforward contest between the manly man and the aesthete. Yet O'Brien is piqued by Earle's success with women. Although Earle agrees that his "temperament is unmoral," he retrieves his reputation by flippantly adding that "I'd like a family of sons and daughters mothered by several women I've known!" (158). In other words, Earle, no matter how much of a degenerate aesthete he may at first seem, ultimately stakes a claim in the reproductive, heterosexual world.

The New Woman figure, James James, is at first Earle's urban fin-de-siècle counterpart. While she is feminine in appearance, she evinces a maleness connoted by her name (she is "Jim" to her friends) that derives from the female masculinities associated with the New Woman. Such fictional gender bending was grist to the mill for the periodicals of the day, as we can see in *Punch's* satires. However, as I have discussed elsewhere, this deployment of female masculinity served a number of important functions for contemporary feminists, since it illustrated women's capability for public responsibilities and roles, as well as exposed the ways in which gender is constructed and performed.²² Equally at home as an independent citizen in the metropolis, Jim is a successful career woman with a wide social and professional network but, noticeably, "no women confidantes" (151). Therefore Jim, like Earle, preserves the inviolability of her inner life.

At the outset, Jim's fate seems clear; she is an autonomous subject moving through a new modern urban landscape and has all of the tools at her disposal to make a steady income for a self-sufficient life. She is educated and well read (her familiarity with Latin and her combative interaction with the men during their conversation about literature attest to this fact), and she is dedicated to her profession, as her approaching O'Brien to find out the editorial bent of a particular publisher, because she needs to respond to "an offer from America" by the midnight mail, suggests (146, 149). Moreover, she

834 lives independently: she is a woman who “belonged to two clubs; shared her quarters in Chancery Lane with a woman who spent nine months of the year away; was a welcome guest at vagabond dinners, river-parties, [etc.]” (151).²³ Lauren Berlant traces the hope that intimate lives might personalize the public sphere back to what she calls the “Victorian fantasy” of separate spheres, to the idea “that the world can be divided into a controllable space (the private-affective) and an uncontrollable one (the public-instrumental).”²⁴ Egerton and her radical contemporaries challenged the privatization of women in the domestic realm. By bringing her three protagonists together on a busy London street, specifically Fleet Street (home to the English newspaper industry), she situates their initial interaction in a context of print media and book contracts; crucially, they meet on equal terms in this social universe. Throughout the story, Jim appears in places that encourage what Berlant terms “collective intimacy” (283)—at clubs, at river parties, vagabond dinners, and in other public entertainment venues. The conclusion the reader may arrive at is that Jim has freed herself from the private sphere; we learn nothing of her family of origin or any care responsibilities she might have once had.

Jim’s bohemian existence in the London metropolis shares the backdrop to a number of New Woman novels. Like the protagonist in Katherine Cecil Thurston’s *Max* (1910), Jim’s rooms (situated a short walk away from Fleet Street) contain “many bookshelves, a workmanlike desk . . . and a great many sketches of Jim herself by artist friends in different mediums” (153). Her rooms are her workplace, and her books and sketches suggest an ongoing exchange of ideas and art forms. Further, even when she is in her rooms, she hosts “at homes”—that is to say, her rooms are open to all-comers, who freely wander in and out. One such unnamed contemporary who arrives for tea is described as “a tall, strongly built woman” with a deep voice; she is dressed in “a severe tweed gown” that further enhances the masculinity of her appearance (154). She takes Earle to task for his promiscuity, pinning him down to define what he means by “freedom of action,” asking him if that by it, he means “liberty for emotional experiments.” (159). The suggestion of female masculinity, coupled with this character’s lack of inhibition in tackling Earle in this way, heightens the tension in the episode. It also intimates the undefined attachment between Earle and Jim. In the same scene, we learn that O’Brien is particularly unhappy about their implicit emerging relationship: “He resented having been the instrument to bring them together. . . . If it had been any one else but Earle, any one else but little Jim” (153).

In the initial encounter between the aesthete and the New Woman, Egerton revisits her well-known story “A Lost Masterpiece,” which had appeared in the *Yellow Book*.²⁵ There, as Kate Krueger Henderson has observed, “the inability to contain or convert this woman into a passive and transparent object of his impressions completely unmans the *flâneur*’s creative project.”²⁶ By retracing the footsteps of the *flâneur* in that earlier story, where the determined progress of the New Woman on the city streets stymies his art, Earle has already deliberately intercepted Jim, almost as if she were his adversary: “At this stage of his speculation he dropped his stick adroitly as they crossed Fleet Street. She had to step aside to avoid it” (148). A later street scene extends the comparison between the two stories. As demand for Jim’s work falls away, the narrator

describes her professional frustrations in moving freely around the city. While seeking new lodgings, she meets a fellow author on the street and recognizes the pawn ticket in his hand. Her imminent homelessness drives Jim to despair:

Her muddy little boots irritated her out of all proportion; the end of her gown had touched the 'bus step as she got off, and it smeared them as she walked. She felt that she hated the people who barred her path—idiots, to stand gaping in the wet streets! Why didn't they keep to the right? She could have screamed at a weak-eyed youth who hooked the only decent veil she had left in his umbrella. (166–67)

This passage might be interpreted as a conscious reversal of “A Lost Masterpiece,” in which the flâneur loses his train of thought and watches his own work of art ebb away from him in the face of a New Woman's threatening advance toward him. In “The Chessboard of Guendolen,” by contrast, the New Woman finds herself impeded by the urban crowd who literally presses in on her, soiling and damaging her clothing. Ultimately, Jim cannot sustain her autonomy, and her carefully preserved distance is torn away (“the only decent veil she had left”), leaving her vulnerable to the encroaching mob. This episode prompts her retreat from the public sphere for good.

Egerton, Gender, and “Emotional Liberty”

Almost denuded metaphorically by the mob, Jim's professional career comes to an end, which understandably leads her to seek emotional support. She turns to Earle. This pattern is consistent with many of Egerton's stories, which put pressure on finding ways of negotiating intimate relationships. From *Keynotes* to *Flies in Amber*, Egerton's works question whether such emotional bonds, especially for women, can prove liberating. Her narratives often begin with an intimate moment or make reference to a past liaison and then move on to explore received ideas about the couple, the family, and the promise offered by romance. Egerton is frank in her approach to the consequences of intimacy, particularly by foregrounding the politics of reproduction, which was freighted with real dangers at the time. Although liberated protagonists in New Woman fiction often remain celibate or maintain free unions while remaining childless or conveniently dying in childbirth, Egerton's women characters assume full responsibility for their sexuality. Her women grapple with their conflicted desire for unsuitable partners (including men who are keen to marry her female protagonists but not to have children with them or men who are not emotionally available as either partners or parents), they deal with the consequences of being single mothers, and they resolve the difficulties of limiting family size by means of makeshift contraception methods; at the same time, they seek a balance between the competing demands of career and family. Although she distanced herself from contemporary feminist organizations and aims, Egerton nonetheless tackled many of the thornier questions facing first-wave feminists. In some of her stories, such as “At the Heart of the Apple” (1897) and “The Regeneration of Two” (1894), she attempts to reshape women's private relationships by

836 removing men from the frame, facilitating mother-child dyads or creating communities composed wholly of women and children.

"The Chessboard of Guendolen," however, goes in a different direction: the narrative questions the traditional romance by considering the erotic possibilities between (so to speak) "manly women" and "womanly men," while also exploring gender difference and inequality in this reconfigured type of other-sex intimacy. The story of the mutual attraction between these (seemingly opposite) social groups undermines received ideas about the queerness of effeminate men and mannish women. Egerton was well placed to observe the social interactions between unconventional women and men in the new world of the 1890s, and her own intimate relationship with flamboyant aesthete Richard Le Gallienne is a visible influence here. Significantly, she attends to the psychic damage done to a generation socialized to expect customary Victorian endings to their own marriage plots but who, despite this predictable prospect, attempt to forge previously unimagined ways of relating intimately to one another. As we have seen, when the story opens, Jim's emotional life is inviolate; she has yet to feel the full impact of erotic and emotional attraction. The observation that she had "no women confidantes" intimates that she is not lesbian; moreover, her relations with men are platonic: "Men never affected her by their maleness; she had no peculiar voice for them, no particular look in her eyes, nor indeed any special manner for their benefit, as have so many women of the old-fashioned conscious type" (151). Once her desire for Earle begins to develop, it has a detrimental effect on Jim; it appears as "baleful as the obsession of something evil" (163). Their intimacy effectively puts a stop to her "frank good-comradeship" with other men, narrows her social life, and cuts her off from O'Brien, among others (163). In any case, O'Brien's relationship to Jim had been an avuncular one, as we can see in his use of the diminutive "little Jim," the way he condescendingly "smile[s] down at her" (146), and her tendency to look up to him (she "had always, hitherto, come to him for advice or help" [154]). There is a hint, too, that he preferred her as a boyish figure. Now that her androgyny is threatened by the new emotional landscape of a heterosexual relationship, one that affirms her femininity, O'Brien cannot relate to her as a colleague.

While isolating Jim socially, the relationship with Earle also threatens her professional life: "It had told on her work" (164). The narrator observes that this was because "she was no longer able to strike the 'newest' note with just a shade more picquancy [*sic*] than any other woman on the press" (164). When Jim plumbs the depths of her writer's block, she realizes that it has come as a direct result of her attachment to Earle: "She had, or he had, slain her fancy. Her writing had always been an outcome of moods—moods resultant on pleasant episodes, humorous points of view, a light-some hedonistic philosophy of life, in which her heart had played no part" (169). In effect, their relationship has eroded her professional activities; she is now described as "hollow-eyed and wan" (163). No longer the woman who can spend days lost in her writing; instead, she is transformed into exactly the "blue butterfly" that Earle originally conjured, one dependent on the aesthete to animate her: "She was seized by the shoulders, whirled round, and drawn to the light" (170). She becomes, once again, his

erotic object. Earle's provocative comments about the New Woman come to mind here: "A Diana on a bike affects me like a tonic—makes me want to ask her to dismount, and let me rest my weary head upon her breast" (157–58). In just this way, it seems, Earle has appropriated Jim, rendering her unfit for anything else but to serve his needs.

Economic instability underpins heteronormativity in the period, too, as the story makes plain: Jim is dependent on her writing to earn a living, and in the absence of that and her friends to support her, she becomes ever more reliant on Earle. Such dependency gestures to the underlying social context, when women did not have equal pay or professional rights and when heteronormative relationships, respectable or otherwise, provided them with financial security. When Jim spots a woman on the street she recognizes as a chorus girl she has seen in a show, her eye is drawn to the girl's jewelry and ermine collar; Jim's response to this scene is to reflect on the biblical phrase "the wages of sin" (Romans 6: 23), which of course signals her perception of the performer's sexual exploitation (168). This observation is swiftly juxtaposed with her own meager existence: "How she loathed Bovril [beef tea] and zebra-striped toast with its suspicion of gas stove" (168). Importantly, these debasing circumstances persuade her to live with Earle in a free union. When she later reproaches herself for this decision, she acknowledges that she had "barter[ed], as a huckster, heart and body for maintenance in return" (176–77). The pressure to conform, even for a couple in a free union, is made evident in their nervousness about their being seen together, their swift migration on the morning boat (as they leave the country so as to live together in a "free union"), and Earle's gift of a wedding band that Jim agrees to wear; ultimately, they consider themselves lucky that "not a friend or acquaintance suspected that their absence [from their social circles] had anything in common" (175). Even though she has rejected bourgeois notions of sexual continence and the marriage contract, Jim nonetheless rebukes herself for having adhered to an undignified heterosexual script, that of man and his mistress: she had "play[ed] the part he had written down for her" (176). She anticipates an ideal "woman of the future" who "neither desir[es] to imitate man nor to acquire any of his characteristics, other than those that must come to her as a result of the absolutely free development of herself in life" (176).

Given Egerton's socialization in Ireland, such abandonment of upright values—regardless of Jim's serious misgivings—was radical; Irish society in the post-Famine era was singular in its commitment to what social theorists call "familism."²⁷ This national investment in sexual continence, which was intertwined with firmly held beliefs about women's erotic passivity (in turn reinforced by contemporary Catholic social teaching), produced a highly repressive system of sexual regulation for Irish people in the late nineteenth century. As Kathryn Conrad observes, the emergence in the culture more generally of late nineteenth-century psychological discourses gave an added edge to this practice, the gatekeepers of which "pathologized as disorderly those who did not fit their prescribed roles as reproducers and caretakers of the family."²⁸ Egerton's fiction explores means of escape from these hegemonies. Her work posed an open challenge to a culture that instated sexual restraint and familism, which Joseph Valente has described as "the indispensable building block of national formation and reproduction" on which Ireland constructed a sustainable future.²⁹

838 O'Brien has already anticipated Jim's sense that she remains trapped within heteronormative culture: "You don't," he says to her, "belong to the old sort of woman who is vanishing, and you don't belong to the one to come who will adapt life to her own needs, not adapt herself to it" (160). His dialogue exposes the narrative's implicit indictment of a social world within which "a straight little woman, fighting her way right pluckily" cannot keep her footing (146). Near the end of the story, Jim reflects that in fact O'Brien, rather than Earle, "had known her better than she knew herself" (183–84). This revelation comes as a surprise to Jim, perhaps because of O'Brien's identification as a manly man (usually constructed as incapable of emotional intelligence); however, O'Brien's perceptiveness is hardly surprising, given his outsider status as an Irish man and a serial migrant. Earle, too, is a *fin-de-siècle* manifestation of an aesthete who has yet to find a home in the contemporary social world; a female friend describes him as "a spirit not so much of negation as of indifference, to whom nothing was too sacred for experiment; who had lost all his old beliefs, without finding anything better to replace them" (152). However, in Earle's case, in contrast to Jim's, the disavowal of the conventional "old beliefs" facilitates his "liberty for emotional experiments" (159), thus enabling his sexual license and cultural agency.

The final section of "The Chessboard of Guendolen," which is physically set apart from the rest of the story by a series of five rupturing asterisks across the page, tells a different tale from the one that precedes it. It opens with Jim waking up in a quiet domesticated setting in the countryside. Its Suffolk farmhouse location marks her escape from the perils of mass society into privatized (and bourgeois) comfort. Here she is taking a breakfast tray in a sunny bedroom. However, this rural idyll is undercut by the revelation that Earle has just left her. Jim, who once moved freely through the public sphere and imagined a transnational future, now sentimentalizes the family unit, despite the fact that she has witnessed brutality against working-class wives in the locale. Even though she acknowledges the domestic violence underpinning the repressive rule of familism, Jim's rejection of feminist principles about her own bodily integrity becomes clear; her reaction is to consider that "there were worse ways of hurting a woman than by blackening her eyes!" (180). In her current view of the world, "the child was the keystone of the whole human structure" (183).

Yet at this point the narrative destabilizes Jim's apparent retrenchment to such conservatism. Curiously, O'Brien's name, all but absent in the second half of the story, recurs here. Immediately, Egerton's narrator resorts to a technique Egerton uses throughout her earlier fiction, referring to her characters only as "he" and "she," with no clear antecedents. As such, in the passages that follow it becomes impossible to tell whether in fact Jim is here grieving the loss of O'Brien rather than Earle. The difficulty of distinguishing between the two men is evident when Jim, having gone outside for a walk, experiences a storm that in her distraught mind resembles an imperial battle: "'Great guns booming, musketry rattling, shrapnel'—Great God! what did she care about the words? if only she could feel sure he were safe" (186). The sensory experience of the storm, whose description makes use of the full range of skills that Egerton had learned from Hansson, provides a further experimental rupture in the story. This

episode, which puts Jim in touch with her elemental nature, suggests that she yearns for an altogether more traditional heterosexual outcome than free union with an aesthete would allow; the scene implies that she longs to enjoy conventional intimacy with a manly man like O'Brien.

In the end, the regularizing of Jim's domestic situation thwarts the radical sexual potential that the "The Chessboard of Guendolen" initially proposes. Where Jim's role as mistress has compelled her to relinquish her New Woman identity along with her self-directed life, the aesthete Earle remains autonomous and undomesticated. Perhaps it is Jim's realization that Earle will never give up his artistic freedom and distanced *fânerie* that lies behind what may well be her possible yearning for the masculine O'Brien when she imagines the storm as an exchange of gunfire. However, in an unsettled plot that keeps shifting focus, Earle undergoes a striking reversal in the penultimate scene. Earle returns to claim her, throws over his adherence to new ideas, and commits himself fully to bourgeois heterosexual culture. In his proposal to marry her, he calls Jim his "wife," and they join in a celebration of their family unit. His marriage proposal invokes the sentimental memory of his mother, whose leather case he gives to Jim, thus connecting their future family unit with his ancestry. Strikingly, Earle's final commitment to Jim, expressed across a nine-page monologue, completely silences her. Earle gradually becomes aware that she is pregnant only when he lays his weary head on her lap (rather than on her breast, as in his earlier sketch of the scene with his Diana figure). The final seal is put on Jim's new status as wife; she is reduced to her bodily functions and isolated entirely from the (masculine) public sphere.

This ending reneges on the promise held out by Egerton's earlier work, in which New Woman figures achieve autonomy and find innovative ways to disrupt heteronormativity. Moreover, Egerton has already made it plain that Jim cannot survive as a professional woman in the public world. There are autobiographical undertones to this ending; by the turn of the twentieth century, Egerton had been earning her living as a writer for almost a decade and faced the ongoing challenge of achieving professional autonomy in a marketplace where women could never operate with the freedom and recognition granted to their male counterparts. Furthermore, she was all too familiar with the difficulties of maintaining a heterosexual relationship on equal terms. "The Chessboard of Guendolen" identifies this impasse and, as such, we might read it as a chapter in the affective history of the New Woman.

Notwithstanding that impasse, however, Egerton subverts the bleak ending to Jim's story in two key ways. First of all, she undermines the cozy domestic scene in Suffolk with Earle's desertion and ironically counterpoints Jim's idealization of the family unit with the poverty and domestic violence of the local family she encounters. Secondly, Egerton opens up a fissure in the text by unleashing the full force of storms (environmental and emotional), which gives her protagonist access to psychic turmoil. The storm scene allows Jim to deal with her feelings for O'Brien and, perhaps, to mourn the life she has left behind. Thus, while a conservative life narrative seems to be valorized in "The Chessboard of Guendolen," contrary elements erupt with such force into some parts of the penultimate episode that, at least temporarily, they have a destabilizing effect on the story's conservative affinities.

840 Scholarly analysis of Egerton's work to date has tended to minimize the transgressive force in evidence in this story, in part because scholars have tended to read her oeuvre within a too confined framework. On the one hand, scholars have tended to characterize her as a leading voice for the New Woman, despite the fact—unlike Sarah Grand and others who advocated for first-wave feminist organizations—Egerton refused invitations to join such organizations as the Women Writers' Club. On the other hand, they have situated her stylistically progressive fiction within British decadent or Scandinavian modernist milieu. But, as I have said, she was a translocational Irish writer. In the post-Famine period, Egerton's Irishness becomes a floating signifier that creates cross-national connections between migrants in New York, female sexual dissidents, political double agents, and emotionally detached aesthetes in London. In this way, she anticipated the literary expression of unconventional migrant experiences, hybrid national identities, and subversive intimate relations that Irish writers George Moore, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett later developed. It is this type of nomadic migratory movement in her fictions that distinguishes them as transitional, dissident, and protomodernist.

Notes:

1. Margaret D. Stetz's pioneering research renewed scholarly interest in George Egerton's work in the 1990s; her publications on Egerton include "The New Grub Street and the Woman Writer of the 1890s," in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s*, ed. Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 21–45, and the recently published "Feminist Politics and the Two Irish 'Georges': Egerton versus Shaw," in *Shaw and Feminisms: On Stage and Off*, ed. D. A. Hadfield and Jean Reynolds (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), 133–43. Most studies of New Woman literature address Egerton's work but, with notable exceptions, tend to focus on one or two of the stories from her early collections, *Keynotes* and *Discords* (1894). See, for instance, Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), Lyn Pykett, *Engendering Fictions: the English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), Elaine Showalter, *Daughters of Decadence* (London: Virago, 1996), Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), Iveta Jusová, *The New Woman and the Empire* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), Maureen O'Connor, *The Female and the Species: The Animal in Irish Women's Writing* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), and Tina O'Toole, *The Irish New Woman* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

2. For the origin of the term "translocational," see Floya Anthias, "Thinking through the Lens of Translocational Positionality: An Intersectionality Frame for Understanding Identity and Belonging," *Translocations: Migration and Social Change* 4, no. 1 (2009): 5–20.

3. Egerton was born in 1859 on a British army base in Melbourne, the daughter of an Irish army captain, John Joseph (Jack) Dunne, and Isabel George, his Welsh wife. Dunne's unambiguously Catholic and Irish nationalist politics undoubtedly shaped his daughter's political sensibilities, positioning her outside of British political and cultural hegemonies. The Dunnes lived in a number of colonial outposts before settling in Dublin (ca. 1870), where Egerton spent her adolescence and early adulthood. She was peripatetic throughout her life, living at various points in the Netherlands, Norway, the United States, London, and Ireland.

4. Guendolen (or Gwendolen) appears in mythic Celtic genealogies, and is sometimes described as a Welsh saint. Charlotte Mary Yonge observes that "in the *Triads* and the *Mabinogion*, Gwendolen is a beauty of Arthur's court, and in the bardic enumeration of the thirteen wonders of Britain appears

the gold chess-board of Gwendolen on which, when the silver men were placed, they would play of themselves" (*History of Christian Names*, vol. 1 [London: Parker and Bourn, 1863], 269). Yonge also points out the connections between Gwendolen and Guinivere. While Egerton may have heard the legend from her Welsh mother, she might otherwise have come across it in Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1485).

5. See, for instance, Scott McCracken, "A Novel from/on the Margins: George Egerton's *Wheel of God*," in *Gender and Colonialism*, ed. Timothy Foley et al. (Galway: Galway University Press, 1995), 139–57; Tina O'Toole, "Keynotes from Millstreet, Co. Cork: George Egerton's Transgressive Fictions," *Colby Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2000): 145–56, and Sally Ledger, introduction to *Keynotes and Discords*, by George Egerton (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham Press, 2003), ix–xxvi. Authoritative survey works have begun to address this lacuna in Egerton criticism; see, for instance, John Wilson Foster, *Irish Novels 1890–1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and James H. Murphy, *Irish Novelists in the Victorian Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). My recent book, *The Irish New Woman*, reads Egerton as an Irish diasporic writer.

6. Diane Negra, introduction to *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

7. For further discussion of this point, see, for instance, Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

8. Margaret D. Stetz, "Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth: Bookselling at the Bodley Head in the Eighteen-Nineties," *Victorian Studies* 35, no. 1 (1991): 72.

9. Stetz observes that *Keynotes* sold over six thousand copies in its first year (not including American sales) and earned a profit of approximately £500 for the Bodley Head. It went into eight editions over the following years ("Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth," 72).

10. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 37, 40.

11. While living in Langesund in the late 1880s, Egerton learned Norwegian and read Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, and Knut Hamsun; she discovered the work of Swedish author Ola Hansson and, through him, that of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work was virtually unknown at the time in the English-speaking world. Hansson, with whom Egerton corresponded extensively, also introduced her to the work of French symbolists. She later translated *Young Ofeg's Vision* (1892), considered to be Hansson's most Nietzschean work.

12. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

13. Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change: Race, Sex, and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2010), 5.

14. George Egerton, "The Chessboard of Guendolen" in *Flies in Amber*, 143–94 (London: Hutchinson, 1905), 164.

15. Many of O'Brien's countrymen and women found common cause with the Boers, who were seen by Irish nationalists as having a similar political cause as their own; indeed some went to fight on the Boer side as part of the Irish Transvaal Brigade.

16. Gerd Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures: Women Writers and the Crisis of the Novel, 1880–1900* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1987), 135.

17. George Egerton, *The Wheel of God* (London: Grant Richards, 1898), 68–69.

18. Until 1916, Ireland observed "Dublin mean time," setting its clocks by the Dunsink observatory, which was twenty-five minutes, twenty-one seconds behind GMT. James Joyce uses this temporal disjuncture to play with the results of horse races and temporality more generally. In the "Ithaca" episode of *Ulysses*, Bloom considers a scheme to set up a wireless telegraph system as a betting dodge; this idea is prompted by Bloom's confusion about the correct time in "Lestrygonians," when he mistakes "Dunsink time" for GMT. See *Ulysses* (London: Penguin 1986), 126, 589.

19. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 301.

20. Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2002), 23.

- 842 21. The comment may point to Wilde's *Poems* (London: David Bogue, 1881), which, in 1892, John Lane reissued with a fresh binding and title page designed by Charles Ricketts.
22. See Tina O'Toole, "The New Woman and the Boy," in *The Irish New Woman*, 110–28.
23. This is most likely a reference to the New Vagabond club, one of the largest and most successful London dinner clubs at the turn of the century.
24. Lauren Berlant, introduction to "Intimacy," ed. Lauren Berlant, special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 283.
25. George Egerton "A Lost Masterpiece," *Yellow Book* 1 (1894): 189–96.
26. Kate Krueger Henderson, "Mobility and Modern Consciousness in George Egerton's and Charlotte Mew's *Yellow Book* Stories," *English Literature in Transition* 54, no. 2 (2011): 196.
27. David Cairns and Shaun Richards explain that this code, designed to restrict family size and thereby population growth as well as to safeguard primogeniture, emerged as a means to avoid the land subdivisions commonly believed to have been a cause of the Famine (*Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* [Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988], 42).
28. Kathryn A. Conrad, *Locked in the Family Cell: Gender, Sexuality and Political Agency in Irish National Discourse* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 7.
29. Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 124.